

When I first went to Israel in 1999 to undertake a sharp, focused inquiry into a movement of ethnic and religious revival, it was hardly my intention to produce an interpretation of the country's multifarious structures and its mosaic of identities. But, once Batia Siebzeiner had rescued my project, the subject of my inquiries, Shas, the Sephardi movement of religious and ethnic revival, drew us ever further along the interweaving pathways of Israel's political structures, through criss-crossing ethnic and quasi-ethnic loyalties, and between the tectonic plates of the country's religious blocs. I found that although Israel's political system – which has defeated the classificatory efforts of the most distinguished political scientists - could certainly be described as a democracy, it is hardly a liberal one; and that this democracy shaped enclaves conformed by a plethora of loyalties among the Jews – even without taking into account the divisions between Jews and Arabs. political, ethnic and religious. These enclaves are symbolized by all sorts of paraphernalia, most visibly how men cover their heads, and they also determine, for example, where people live, who they date and marry, and what schools they attend. Thus we had to recognize that Shas, the only mass party ever to speak up for the Sephardim, especially for those originating from North Africa, by playing its cards ruthlessly according to the rules of enclave politics, had forced the elite to concede to them a stake in the political system. If its leaders had adopted an impeccably modern, universalist, social democratic agenda to build programmes for the deprived, to improve the educational and job opportunities of the marginalized populations of the development towns, in the place of their ethnic-based strategy, they would have got nowhere. We also learnt about the permeability of some enclave frontiers, as we saw the Shasniks, even while invoking the glories of their ancient traditions, adopt so many religious habits and methods of study from the Ashkenazi yeshiva leaders at whose hands they suffer still today the humiliation and discrimination which they themselves decry. And thus we learnt that tens of thousands of non-observant Sephardim responded to Shas's message of religious revival (t'shuva) by voting for the party, even if their daily lives continued as before. Religion, plus ethnicity, plus class resentment had certainly proved a potent mix.

The secular-‘left’ public professes an aversion for Shas which sometimes verges on the seriously politically incorrect – an aversion which the Shas leaders have fed and in which to some extent they have revelled, but which also reflects a guilty conscience. On account of its outward-looking style and the primacy of its t'shuva project, hostility to Shas is usually expressed in terms of dislike of the party's methods and opportunism, or of its fundamentalism, but it is also very common to hear members of the secular elite describe its success as something like a ‘wake-up call’. For Shas's success is also a consequence of the failure of the left, which in Israel is by now a largely upper middle class grouping, to deal effectively with the country's social problems.

In fact, Shas is a social movement, grown from the grassroots and penetrating society and the state in innumerable niches and spaces and using state resources also to penetrate society. It set out in 1984 with 4 Knesset seats, reaching 6 in 1992 and 9 in 1996. The extraordinary number of 17 seats it gained in the 1999 elections was a kind of overshoot, and their 1993 take of 11 seats (out of 120) is closer to Shas's ‘natural’ level. Labour once took the Sephardi vote for granted, and then lost it in 1977 to the Likud, which in turn has lost some of it to Shas, though in times of heightened international tension, as in 2003, the vote migrates back to Likud. The party's success

owes much to the talents and daring of its leader Ariele Deri in understanding the popularity of a religious appeal to a Sephardi population which, though not strictly observant, is respectful of tradition, and is responsive to a nostalgic evocation of the lost certainties of the life they, or more likely their parents, had led before emigrating to Israel. From parochial beginnings in the yeshiva world, where they were fed up with the humiliations and discriminations they were suffering as Sephardim, an electoral opportunity in 1983 gave Deri and his associates the chance to broaden their own protest movement by tapping the resentments of the secular urban Sephardi population. This link spread out from Jerusalem to the so-called development towns, which were disproportionately Sephardi and also disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, and other social problems, notably drugs. They also gained enormous legitimacy from the active commitment and leadership of Ovadia Yosef, twice Sephardi Chief Rabbi, who provided a patriarchal religious counterpart to Deri's youthful dynamism.

Shas was in government more or less uninterruptedly from 1988 till 2003, during which period Deri occupied several posts, becoming Minister of the Interior before the age of 30, until his trial on corruption charges. He and his colleagues used their bargaining power to establish a parallel religious education system and to squeeze resources out of the state for a myriad of consciousness-raising and religious activities and organizations. Shas's HaMa'ayan education network was enshrined in law during the Rabin government and was designed to get the children of Sephardi families, principally those of primary school age, off the streets and into whole-day school, so as to help their parents manage jobs and parenthood, and also to imbue them with a renewed religious culture. By 2002 it had some 27,000 pupils, mostly in primary schools. This is not as many as its founders might have hoped, given the party's 250,000 votes in 2003 (430,000 in 1999), but it is instructive, for what Shas has understood is that the road to power in Israel is through those enclaves: parties carve themselves out enclaves within the state and use those to create and perpetuate clienteles in society. By 2003 Sharon had he had enough of their endless pressure for resources and threw them out of the government, Shas had created a separate network for consciousness-raising, including women's clubs, adult religious education and activities such as, to take one small example, the regeneration of defunct moshav synagogues, all of which made jobs for followers and allowed the party to build on the enthusiasm of its grassroots activists.

T'shuva campaigns

A prime example of Shas's t'shuva project is the Or HaChayyim network of (reputedly) 200 schools and yeshivas for almost exclusively Sephardi ba'alei t'shuva ('returnees'). This has been one of the movement's most successful undertakings, funded by government subsidies for yeshiva students who may have barely studied Torah in their lives but have undergone a quasi-conversion. Its leader, Reuven Elbaz, started out recruiting marginalized young North African Jews for t'shuva in the low dives and billiard halls of Jerusalem in the 1960s. Or HaChayyim students tell stories of renouncing the life of parties and frivolity to devote themselves to 'the world to come', in a classic narrative of conversion one also hears from born again Christians and Muslim returnees. The yeshiva houses them, provides a government subsidy, like all full-time yeshiva students, of about \$300 a month, and keeps them busy full time with study and religio-political activism, and eventually finds them a wife. The model

bears much similarity to Chabad, and Elbaz now has a worldwide reputation as a missionary to secularized Jews, notably in France and Latin America. The mammoth centre which Or HaChayyim has been building since 2001 in the Boukharim neighbourhood of Jerusalem, next to Mea Shearim, is testimony to his charisma and fund-raising abilities.

Right from the beginning of Zionist settlement, grassroots activism has been a driving force in Israeli politics. A recent notorious example is the settler vanguard, but Shas too specializes in creating facts on the ground, in time-honoured Israeli fashion, for example by occupying trailers on building sites, or bomb shelters – both of which are available in abundance - and converting them into nurseries, kindergartens and Torah study centres. Once they have got something going, they can then press local government or a Ministry for funding. This tactic was particularly successful while Shas controlled the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but has been more difficult since Shas's defenestration and the Ministry's dissolution in 2003. Shas has also had a lot of success in pirate radios which flourish on Israel's quirkily regulated radiowaves. These have the advantage of low costs, and that element of intimacy which allows radio to penetrate people's daily lives. Most transmit in a style and accent which reflects their Sephardi identity and Shas allegiance, even though the party does not control them directly or indirectly, and they run plenty of phone-in programmes and campaigns, promoting t'shuva and school enrolment in Shas schools. In the last couple of years they have become more political, expressing hawkish views.

Shas's opponents sometimes dismiss the party as a corrupt mafia bent on extracting resources from the state by whatever means are available, and Shas has not protected itself against this talk. The cause célèbre was Deri's trial and conviction for using for his personal benefit government funds received by a yeshiva, but there have been other more recent affairs, involving contracts and hiring by Shas Ministers. Deri received a three-year prison sentence starting on 3 September 2000, a fine and a ten-year ban from political office. The maximum prison sentence would have been 5 years. The case had dragged on throughout the 1990s, went right up to the Supreme Court and was portrayed by Shas as a campaign to destroy a man who threatened the entire political establishment - and indeed Deri's talents were widely recognized across the political spectrum as a brilliant leader and politician.

The Deri case brought the ethnic resentment embodied by Shas to the fore. During the 1990s he had taken Shas down an increasingly populist road with shrill invocations of Sephardi heritage and resentment against both their treatment in the haredi world and the deprivations suffered by the Sephardim. Shas bitterly recalled the absorption camps where immigrants from North Africa, who had fled panic-stricken to Israel in the wake of the 1956 and 1967 wars, were said to have undergone DDT sprayings in case they were infested with disease; they denounced the secular state as something foreign to their traditions: '*they* came to build a Zionist state, while *we* came to the Holy Land' was the standard refrain. Deri went for very high stakes by encouraging and fuelling this portrayal, and in the 1999 elections this tactic helped Shas gain a sympathy vote, when he issued a *J'accuse* video denouncing the Supreme Court and the entire establishment for its prejudices against Sephardim and against Judaism itself. In the short run this worked, especially with the Shas electorate, among whom an opinion poll found that 81 per cent thought that Deri did not receive a fair trial. But it also underlined a cultural/class schism in Israeli society – for only 19 per cent of the

Israeli public as a whole took the same view. The trial episode, the innuendo about prejudice in the Supreme Court and in the Public Prosecutor's office, and the endless campaigning, culminating in a chaotic commune-cum-yeshiva at the gates of the Ramleh prison, alienated potential allies and heralded a period of edgy relations between Shas and both left and right.

Deri resembled a serial parricide, denouncing his erstwhile political protectors and just as he had fallen out with the leader of the yeshiva world in 1992. Soon he was to fall out with his dearest father figure, Ovadia Yosef, who eventually tired of the endless campaigns and told the party to get on with the business of building synagogues, mikvot and yeshivas, and extracting resources from the government for their schools.

The originality of Shas's dissenting stance is further reflected in Deri's attacks on the yeshiva establishment which had nurtured significant numbers of young North African bochurim, himself included, especially when they had to replenish their numbers after the Holocaust. Though usually quite guarded on such subjects, on one occasion in 1997 he said that 'racism in South Africa is as nothing compared to the treatment of Sephardim in the ultra-Orthodox school system... Ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazim have racism in their blood'. It is a most striking paradox that, despite this widespread resentment, Shas seeks to propagate Ashkenazi haredi usages of dress, observance and study which are far removed from the North African and Middle Eastern Jewish tradition. Sephardi haredim have in recent years also adopted the haredi practice of extremely high fertility, even going above the general haredi average. Shasniks are instantly recognizable from a style of dress which is a slightly, but significantly, modified version of the 'uniform' of Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox: white shirt, tall hat (but theirs is a Borselino), black suit, and beard (but Shasnik beards are usually groomed and not wiry). On the other hand, Shas women make out their difference by covering their hair with a net and never wear wigs, which Ovadia Yosef has described as a strictly an Ashkenazi custom.

Crossing religious frontiers

Shas would dearly love to build Sephardi yeshivas of comparable (or even half-comparable) prestige to the top Ashkenazi institutions like Mir and Podniewicz, but it is widely recognized that Orthodox Sephardi parents send their children to Ashkenazi institutions wherever possible. In this they are undeterred by a draconian *numerus clausus* which is applied not only in Ashkenazi yeshivas for all boys over 13, but also in the Bet Yaakov network of girls' schools. (Bet Yaakov, it should be added, is beginning to set up separate schools not only for Sephardi girls, but also for different Chassidic sects, in response to the highly differentiated market which it serves.) Less prestigious yeshivas admit more Sephardim. These distinctions sometimes appear in ways that are both absolute and absolutely uncodified: for example there is a 100 per cent Sephardi yeshiva in Jerusalem, Yekiri Yerushalayim, which has no political agenda at all, and indeed distances itself fiercely from Shas and from any politics: this yeshiva, with its vast building with corridors paved in marble, and excellent facilities for boarders, is far from impoverished. It does not explicitly exclude non-Sephardim, but non-Sephardim simply do not approach it. The boundary is ready made and unbreachable.

It may seem quite bizarre that Sephardim and Ashkenazim only rarely intermarry in haredi society while they do so with barely any comment in secular Israel, but it is less bizarre to those who understand that the drawing of social frontiers, notably in marriage, is consubstantial to religious stringency: the more stringent the religious environment, the thicker the frontiers, and in Israel's enclave system such taboos pass without comment from any quarter.

Scholars comment that Ovadia Yosef's rulings tend to depart from the relatively open or tolerant style of jurisprudence once prevalent in Middle Eastern Judaism, conforming instead to the stricter European approach. In matters of *minhagim* – customs – as distinct from law, he tends to advise that people keep to their own traditions (viz. the hairnets cited above), thus recognizing diversity and avoiding pronouncements about the superiority of one tradition over another. The underlying issue, though, is sadder: Sephardi institutional life was destroyed by Arab nationalism and Jewish emigration, and in a sense also by Zionism, and never recovered, whereas Ashkenazi Judaism – not least by recruiting students from Morocco – rebuilt its institutions, adapted to modernity in Europe and the US, and even adapted in Israel to Zionism, its detested godless rival. Jewish institutions in Morocco and North Africa, with the notable exception of the Tunisian island of Jerba, were under the patronage of elite families, so Rabbis were under the control of prominent notables and lacked the autonomy enjoyed in Eastern and Western Europe by yeshiva heads and Chassidic *Rebbes*, who lived by the fees of their students and the donations of the faithful. When the crisis came in the Arab world, the elites, who spoke French and had received a secular education at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, emigrated to France, Canada, the US and Latin America, while on the whole the masses went to Israel. The tragedy of Ariele Deri is that, for all his populism and rhetorical excess, he wanted to create an outward-looking and modernizing Shas - whereas after his departure the party has tended to retreat into a defensive posture, emphasizing religion over social issues.

Traumatic modernization

All the accounts show that immigrants from Arab lands arriving in Israel in the fifties and sixties were treated pretty roughly: after their passage through the absorption camps they were dispatched to development towns and also to moshavim: the former remained pockets of poverty and the latter were farmers' cooperatives regarded as the poor cousins of the kibbutzim which incarnated Zionism's principles and nurtured its elite. Some of their social problems came to the attention of the media and politicians in the short-lived 'Black Panther' movement of the 1960s. The black legend that has grown up and is of course propagated by Shas is that the immigrants were told very firmly that they had to cut their *peyot*, discard their *djellabas*, forget their respect for Rabbis and saints and adapt to a modern secular society. The Shas rhetoric about resulting family disintegration and loss of respect for parents rings true. Why, they ask, are Moroccans so heavily over-represented in Israeli prisons. Furthermore, they make the simple sociological point that in North Africa the orthodox-secular division simply did not exist: some people were more observant than others, but everyone respected Rabbis and traditions. Jews were Jewish in the same way Muslims were Muslim: they had no choice. The profound secular-religious frontier in Israel made little sense to them, and this explains how Shas, with its explicit message of a return to religious observance and respect for the Torah, garners so many votes from people who are *mazorti* – not very observant but traditionalists nonetheless.

Institutionalizing an Israeli Judaism

The project of Ovadia Yosef is to shape a distinctive, institutionalized Israeli Judaism. This is done through yeshivas like those in the Or HaChayyim network, which attract men who study Torah, change careers, and adopt a lifestyle in which the propagation of the t'shuva message can be combined with their work. The Shas schools are also an important tool of t'shuva because they educate children in a haredi way of thinking, giving priority to religious education, and also enable the teachers, who mostly share in the ethos of t'shuva, to influence parents through the children: children bring home to a secularized household a message about dietary laws, keeping Shabbat and festivals and so on – and schools sanction children whose behaviour reflects an irreligious or improper home background. Returnees are important to Shas because unlike those brought up in haredi households, they bring the skills Shas needs if it is to be a party of government and an effective force of social mobilization.

This reliance on t'shuva is one of several features which Shas shares with other conversion-based religious movements. It is important to realize the extent to which these movements set the pace and even the standard in the world's religious marketplace. In Judaism Chabad, in Christianity the Pentecostal churches, and in Islam the Tablighi jama'at, a quietist movement of spiritual renewal (not to be confused with Political Islam) which, like the others, has a global reach. Shas too has influence among Sephardi Jews in France and also in Argentina. Like all these movements, Shas is anti-secularist and anti-liberal. Its leaders, especially Ovadia Yosef, have sometimes made some pretty shocking statements, such as his description of Israel's Supreme Court justices ('they fornicate with menstruating women' – *The Jerusalem Report*, 24/4/2000) and his scandalous remarks in the wake of Hurricane Katrina which he described as a punishment for US support of the Gaza withdrawal and for the immorality of New Orleans.

Shas also invites comparison with the messianic religious nationalism which has clearly been on the rise for some time in Israel and indeed among Jews worldwide. But several things separate them: the extreme religious nationalists regard their ideology as above the legitimacy of the state, and consist of free-floating random groups led by small-time charismatic freebooters with an infallible eye for weakness of character, fragile personalities and marginalized lives which they then exploit and manipulate. We also notice that whereas Shas has established a model or core constellation of habits, dress and modes of living, religious nationalism etiolates the elements of religious observance and reconfigures them like a kaleidoscope: bits of tzitzit hanging out of baggy jeans; tefillin and tallitim worn at random times and in random places; fragments of Jewish lore and instant miracles conjured out of trivialities; ignorance-fuelled interpretations of biblical texts; ignorance also of Talmudic methods and traditions of debate; rappers chanting the virtues of the 'rages of the Jewish Sages' (in English). All these are ritual, magical and devotional tokens which spread epidemiologically through populations, and can, frighteningly, take hold. In Israel, the state somehow indulged them, and belatedly realized that it had created a Frankenstein, whereupon the entire political elite joined up to regain control in the Gaza disengagement.

Shas in contrast has steered clear of messianism, religious and nationalist. Shas also directs its followers to highly controlled and probably rather tedious Torah learning, rather than to innovative millenarian readings. In spite of Ovadia Yosef's longstanding position ever since a ruling issued in the 1970s supporting the transfer of land in the cause of peace, Shas has taken hawkish positions on the territories since 2001, appeasing an increasingly hawkish constituency. Yosef opposed the Gaza withdrawal on the non-religious grounds that unilateral action will not bring peace because a durable peace has to be agreed with the other party. Shas, nonetheless, refused, emphatically, to support physical or violent resistance against the government's policy once it had passed the Knesset. The territories, for Shas, are a tactical and political issue, not one of divine ordinance.

For despite its hostility to the secular ethos of the Israeli state, the party is firmly and positively committed to that state and its legitimacy: maybe this is not surprising, since Shas, lacking independent institutions with charitable funding, or a strong enough contributory base, is heavily dependent on the state. Thus the party, which currently appears to rely heavily on profits from Ovadia Yosef's state-of-the-art kosher meat factory, will be desperate to get back government after the next election. Deri, for his part, is banned from holding office until 2013.

Corporatism and democracy

Shas embodies one of the innumerable counter-intuitive features of Israeli society and politics. Its leaders could have become a caucus in one of the other parties pressing for improvements in the welfare state for the benefit of their constituency. Instead they elbowed their way in by carving out an enclave, feeding a clientelistic following with state handouts, and brazenly invoking an ethnic-cum-religious challenge to the establishment, which no one had tried before. They wanted to create a leadership for Israel's Sephardim and their strategy was to do this through t'shuva. It was an unprecedented combination: people had tried the ethnic theme a little, and the religious theme had found a niche, but to combine the two was a stroke of genius. Once the enclaves had been carved out, on the ground and in the state apparatus, the party used its position determinedly to institutionalize its education network and to distribute benefits to its followers at national and at local level, where it still wields much influence.

The material results of Shas's exertions in terms of the incomes, employment and education of its followers are unclear. But the party has shown that in Israel's chaotic corporatist, illiberal, democracy a new constituency can fight its way onto centre stage. No matter if the measurable benefits do not satisfy the austere criteria of social engineering: maybe rhetorical presence and swelling pride count for more.

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